

A NATION IS BORN – Shiur #2: A Desert Presence

Based on an article by Rav Yonatan Grossman

Introduction: Chiastic Structures – A Quick Review

Chiastic structure, or chiastic pattern, is a literary technique in narrative motifs and other textual passages. An example of chiastic structure would be two ideas, A and B, together with variants A' and B', being presented as A,B,B',A'.

Here's a chiastic structure in Sefer Shmuel:

- A. Elkana and his family go from Rama to Shilo (1:1-8)
- B. Channa's sad prayer (1:9-11)
 - C. A painful dialogue between Chana and Eli (1:12-18)
 - D. Turning point: birth of Shmuel (1:19-23)
 - C₁. A joyful dialogue between Chana and Eli (1:24-28)
- B₁. Channa's happy prayer (2:1-10)
- A₁. Elkana returns to Rama, but Shmuel remains in Shilo (2:11)

Let's examine the chiastic structure in Sefer Shemot, Chapters 15-17:

1] Shemot Ch. 15 – the tail end of the escape through the Sea

כֹּה וַתַּעַן לָהֶם, מִרְיָם: שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה כִּי-גָאֵה גָאֵה, סוּס וּלְכָבוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם. {ס} 21 And Miriam sang unto them: Sing ye to the LORD, for He is highly exalted: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea. {S}

Shemot Ch. 15

2] COMPLAINT OVER WATER: Upon arriving in Mara, the people complain about thirst, as the bitter waters of Mara could not be ingested. Moshe manages to purify the water

22 And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water.

כב וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף, וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל-מִדְבַּר-שׁוּר; וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת-יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם.

23 And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah.

כג וַיָּבֹאוּ מַרְתָּה--וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשָׁתֵת מִיַּם מַמְרָה, כִּי מָרִים הֵם; עַל-כֵּן קָרְא-שְׁמָהּ, מַרְהָ.

24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying: 'What shall we drink?'

כד וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, מַה-נִּשְׁתֶּה.

25 And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet. There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He proved them;

כה וַיִּצְעַק אֶל ה' וַיֹּרְהוּ יְהוָה עֵץ, וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶל-הַמַּיִם, וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם; שָׁם שָׁם לֹו חֵק וּמִשְׁפָּט, וְשָׁם נִסָּהוּ.

Chapter 16

3] COMPLAINT OVER BREAD AND MEAT: The nation then encamps in the desert - in "Midbar Sin" - and complains over the lack of luxuries that they enjoyed in Egypt.

1 And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt.

וַיִּסְעוּ, מֵאֵילִם, וַיָּבֹאוּ כָּל-עֵדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מִדְבַּר-סִינַי, אֲשֶׁר בֵּין-אֵילִם וּבֵין סִינַי--בְּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי, לִיצְאֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

2 And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness;

ב וַיִּלְנוּ (וַיִּלְוֹנוּ) כָּל-עֵדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן--בְּמִדְבָּר.

3 and the children of Israel said unto them: 'Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots,

ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִי-יָתֵן מוֹתָנוּ בְּיַד-יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּשִׁבְתָּנוּ עַל-סִיר הַבָּשָׂר, בְּאֶכְלֵנוּ לֶחֶם לְשֶׁבַע: כִּי-

- הוֹצֵאתֶם אֹתָנוּ אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה, לְהַמִּית אֶת-כָּל-הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה בְּרָעַב. {ס}
- when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.' {S}
- ד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, הֲנִנִי מִמַּטִּיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם; וַיֵּצֵא הָעָם וּלְקָטוּ דְבַר-יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ, לְמַעַן אֲנַסְנוּ הַיִּלָּךְ בְּתוֹרַתִי אִם-לֹא.
- 4 Then said the LORD unto Moses: 'Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in My law, or not.
- ה וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי, וְהָכִינוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יָבִיאוּ; וְהָיָה מִשְׁנָה, עַל אֲשֶׁר-יִלְקְטוּ יוֹם יוֹם.
- 5 And it shall come to pass on the sixth day that they shall prepare that which they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.'
- ו וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, אֶל-כָּל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: עֲרַב--וַיִּדְעֶתֶם, כִּי יְהוָה הוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.
- 6 And Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel: 'At even, then ye shall know that the LORD hath brought you out from the land of Egypt;
- ז וּבֹקֵר, וּרְאִיתֶם אֶת-כְּבוֹד יְהוָה, בְּשָׁמְעוּ אֶת-תְּלַנְתִּיכֶם, עַל-יְהוָה; וְנַחֲנוּ מָה, כִּי תִלוּנוּ (תְּלִינוּ) עָלֵינוּ.
- 7 and in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the LORD; for that He hath heard your murmurings against the LORD; and what are we, that ye murmur against us?'
- ח וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, בְּתַת יְהוָה לָכֶם בְּעֶרֶב בָּשָׂר לֶאֱכֹל וּלְחֶם בַּבֹּקֵר לְשֹׂבַע, בְּשָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶת-תְּלַנְתִּיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם מְלִינִם עָלָיו; וְנַחֲנוּ מָה, לֹא-עָלֵינוּ תְּלַנְתִּיכֶם כִּי עַל-יְהוָה.
- 8 And Moses said: 'This shall be, when the LORD shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the LORD heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against Him; and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the LORD.'
- ט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, אָמַר אֶל-כָּל-עַדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, קִרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: כִּי שָׁמַע, אֶת תְּלַנְתִּיכֶם.
- 9 And Moses said unto Aaron: 'Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel: Come near before

the LORD; for He hath heard your murmurings.'

י וַיְהִי, כְּדַבֵּר אֶהֱרֹן אֶל-כָּל-עֵדֶת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיִּפְּנוּ, אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר; וַהֲיָה כְבוֹד יְהוָה, נֹרְאָה בְּעָנָן. {פ}

10 And it came to pass, as Aaron spoke unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. {P}

Ch. 17

2a] COMPLAINT OVER WATER: Upon their encampment in Refidim, Benei Yisrael once again express their frustration over the lack of water.

א וַיִּסְעוּ כָל-עֵדֶת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּדְבַר-סִין, לְמִסְעֵיהֶם--עַל-פִּי יְהוָה; וַיִּחַנוּ, בְּרִפְדִים, וְאִין מַיִם, לְשִׁתּוֹת הָעָם.

1 And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, by their stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and encamped in Rephidim; and there was no water for the people to drink.

ב וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם, עִם-מֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, תָּנוּ-לָנוּ מַיִם וְנִשְׁתֵּה; וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, מֹשֶׁה, מַה-תְּרִיבוֹן עִמָּדִי, מַה-תִּנְסוֹן אֶת-יְהוָה.

2 Wherefore the people strove with Moses, and said: 'Give us water that we may drink.' And Moses said unto them: 'Why strive ye with me? wherefore do ye try the LORD?'

ג וַיִּצְמְאוּ שָׁם הָעָם לַמַּיִם, וַיִּלְן הָעָם עַל-מֹשֶׁה; וַיֹּאמְרוּ, לָמָּה זֶה הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, לְהַמִּית אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת-בְּנֵי וְאֶת-מִקְנֵי, בְּצִמְאָה.

3 And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said: 'Wherefore hast thou brought us up out of

Egypt, to kill us and our children
and our cattle with thirst?'

ד ויצעק מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה לֵאמֹר, מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה
לְעַם הַזֶּה; עוֹד מַעֲט, וְסָקְלֵנִי.
4 And Moses cried unto the LORD,
saying: 'What shall I do unto this
people? they are almost ready to
stone me.'

ה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם,
וְקַח אִתְּךָ, מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וּמִטֶּה, אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ
בּוֹ אֶת-הַיָּאֵר--קַח בְּיָדְךָ, וְהִלַּכְתָּ.
5 And the LORD said unto Moses:
'Pass on before the people, and take
with thee of the elders of Israel; and
thy rod, wherewith thou smotest
the river, take in thy hand, and go.

ו הִנְנִי עֹמֵד לְפָנֶיךָ שָׁם עַל-הַצּוּר, בְּחָרֵב,
וְהִכִּיתָ בַּצּוּר וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם, וְשָׁתָה הָעָם;
וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן מֹשֶׁה, לְעֵינֵי זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
6 Behold, I will stand before thee
there upon the rock in Horeb; and
thou shalt smite the rock, and there
shall come water out of it, that the
people may drink.' And Moses did so
in the sight of the elders of Israel.

ז וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם, מַסָּה וּמְרִיבָה: עַל-
רִיב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְעַל נִסְתָּם אֶת-יְהוָה
לֵאמֹר, הֲיֵשׁ יְהוָה בְּקִרְבָּנוּ, אִם-אֵין. {פ}
7 And the name of the place was
called Massah, and Meribah,
because of the striving of the
children of Israel, and because they
tried the LORD, saying: 'Is the LORD
among us, or not?' {P}

Ch. 17

1a] AN EXTERNAL ENEMY: The parasha concludes with the unprovoked attack launched by Amalek, as Benei Yisrael embark on their journey to Mt. Sinai. Led by Yehoshua, Benei Yisrael overpower their enemy.

- ח וַיָּבֹא, עִמְלֶק; וַיִּלָּחֶם עִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרֵפִידִם. 8 Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim.
- ט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּחַר-לָנוּ אַנְשִׁים, וְצֵא הִלָּחֶם בְּעִמְלֶק; מָחָר, אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל-רֹאשׁ הַגְּבֻעָה, וּמִטָּה הָאֱלֹהִים, בְּיָדִי. 9 And Moses said unto Joshua: 'Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.'
- י וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לוֹ מֹשֶׁה--לְהִלָּחֶם, בְּעִמְלֶק; וּמֹשֶׁה אָהֲרֹן וְחֹוּר, עָלוּ רֹאשׁ הַגְּבֻעָה. 10 So Joshua did as Moses had said to him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.
- יא וְהָיָה, כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ--וַגְּבַר יִשְׂרָאֵל; וּכְאֲשֶׁר יִנְיַח יָדוֹ, וַגְּבַר עִמְלֶק. 11 And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.
- יב וַיְדִי מֹשֶׁה כְּבֵדִים, וַיִּקְחוּ-אֶבֶן וַיִּשְׁימוּ תַּחְתָּיו וַיִּשָּׁב עָלֶיהָ; וְאַהֲרֹן וְחֹוּר תָּמְכוּ בְּיָדָיו, מִזֶּה אֶחָד וּמִזֶּה אֶחָד, וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֲמוּנָה, עַד-בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ. 12 But Moses' hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.
- יג וַיַּחֲלֵשׁ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת-עִמְלֶק וְאֶת-עַמּוֹ, לְפִי-חֶרֶב. {פ} 13 And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. {P}
- יד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, כְּתֹב זֹאת זִכְרוֹן בְּסֵפֶר, וְשִׂים, בְּאָזְנֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ: כִּי-מַחָה אֶמְחָה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עִמְלֶק, מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם. 14 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Write this for a memorial in the book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.'
- טו וַיִּבֶן מֹשֶׁה, מִזְבֵּחַ; וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ, יְהוָה נִסִּי. 15 And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Adonai-nissi.

16 And he said: 'The hand upon the throne of the LORD: the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.' {P}

טז וַיֹּאמֶר, כִּי-יָד עַל-כִּסֵּי יְהוָה, מִלְחָמָה לִיהוָה, בְּעַמְלֵק-- מִדֹּר, דֹּר. {פ}

R. Grossman: The nation's journey to Sinai appears in the Chumash in a chiastic structure. The journey begins and ends with the threat posed by a foreign enemy (Egypt/Amalek), and sandwiched in between are two incidents of discontent over the water supply (Mara/Refidim). In the middle of these events lies the centerpiece of the journey, afforded the longest treatment by the text - the request for meat in Midbar Sin. As indicated, this specific incident features several unique elements, which set it apart from the other complaints voiced by the people in this parasha. Most notably, this complaint is followed by a public revelation of the Shekhina

PARALLELS BETWEEN THE MANNA AND KORBAN PESACH

Sefer Shemot Ch. 16

<p>וַיִּסְעוּ, מֵאֵילִם, וַיָּבֹאוּ כָל-עֵדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מִדְבַּר-סִין, אֲשֶׁר בֵּין-אֵילִם וּבֵין סִינַי-- בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי, לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.</p>	<p>1 And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt.</p>
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Shemot 12:3 – What date?

<p>ג דַּבְּרוּ, אֶל-כָּל-עֵדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר, בְּעֶשֶׂר, לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה: וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם, אִישׁ שֵׁה לְבֵית-אָבֹת-- שֵׁה לְבֵית.</p>	<p>3 Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying: In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household;</p>
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Shemot 16:12 – What time of day?

11 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:
 לאמר. יא וידבר יהוה, אל-משה

12 'I have heard the murmurings of the
 children of Israel. **Speak unto them, saying:**
At dusk ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning
 ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall
 know that I am the LORD your God.'
 יב שמעתי, את-תלונת בני
 ישראל--דבר אלהם לאמר בין
 הערבים תאכלו בשר, ובבקר
 תשבעו-לחם; וידעתם, כי אני
 יהוה אלהיכם.

Shemot 12:6

6 and ye shall keep it unto the fourteenth
 day of the same month; **and the whole**
assembly of the congregation of Israel shall
kill it at dusk.
 ו והיה לכם למשמרת, עד
 ארבעה עשר יום לחדש הזה;
 ושמחו אתו, כל קהל עדת-
 ישראל--בין הערבים.

Shemot 16:16 – Proportionate Consumption

16 This is the thing which the LORD hath
 commanded: Gather ye of it **every man**
according to his eating; an omer a head,
 according to the number of your persons, shall
 ye take it, every man for them that are in his
 tent.'
 טז זה הדבר, אשר צוה
 יהוה, לקטו ממנו, איש לפי
 אכלו: עמר לגלגלת, מספר
 נפשותיכם--איש לאשר
 באהלו, תקחו.

Shemot 12:4

4 and if the household be too little for a lamb,
 then shall he and his neighbour next unto his
 house take one according to the number of the
 souls; **according to every man's eating** ye shall
 make your count for the lamb.
 ד ואם-ימעט הבית, מהיות
 משה--ולקח הוא ושכנו
 הקרב אל-ביתו, במכסת
 נפשות: איש לפי אכלו, תכסו
 על-השה.

Shemot 16:18-19 – No Leftovers!

יח וַיִּמְדוּ בְעֹמֶר--וְלֹא הָעֲדִיף 18 And when they did mete it with an omer, he
 הַמְרֵבָה, וְהַמְּעִיט לֹא that gathered much had nothing over, and he
 הַחֲסִיר: אִישׁ לְפִי-אָכְלוּ, that gathered little had no lack; they gathered
 לְקִטּוֹ. every man according to his eating.

יט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, 19 And Moses said unto them: **Let no man**
 אֲלֵהֶם: אִישׁ, אֶל-יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ **leave of it till the morning.'**
 עַד-בֹּקֶר.

Shemot 12:9-10

ט אַל-תֹּאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נָא, וּבִשְׁל 9 Eat not of it raw, nor sodden at all with
 מַבְשָׁל בַּמַּיִם: כִּי אִם-צְלִי-אֵשׁ, water, but roast with fire; its head with its
 רֵאשׁוֹ עַל-כַּרְעֵיו וְעַל-קַרְבּוֹ. legs and with the inwards thereof.

י וְלֹא-תוֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ, עַד-בֹּקֶר; 10 And ye shall let nothing of it remain
 וְהַנֹּתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר, בָּאֵשׁ **until the morning;** but that which remaineth
 תִּשְׂרֹפוּ. of it until the morning ye shall burn with
 fire.

Shemot 16:29 – Don't Leave Home!

כח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל- 28 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'How long
 מֹשֶׁה: עַד-אֵנָּה, מֵאַנְתֶּם, לְשֹׁמֵר will ye refuse ye to keep My commandments and My
 מִצְוֹתַי, וְתוֹרָתִי. laws?

כט רְאוּ, כִּי-יְהוָה נָתַן לָכֶם 29 See that the LORD hath given you the
 הַשַּׁבָּת--עַל-כֵּן הוּא נָתַן לָכֶם sabbath; therefore He giveth you on the sixth
 בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי, לֶחֶם יוֹמִים; שְׁבוּ day the bread of two days; abide ye every man
 אִישׁ תַּחְתּוֹ, אֶל-יֵצֵא אִישׁ in his place, **let no man go out of his place on**
 מִמְּקוֹמוֹ--בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי. **the seventh day.'**

Shemot 12:22

כב וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֲגֻדַּת אֲזוּב, וּטְבַלְתֶּם בְּדָם אֲשֶׁר-בַּסֶּף, וְהִגַּעְתֶּם אֶל-הַמַּשְׁקוּף וְאֶל-שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת, מִן-הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֶּף; וְאַתֶּם, לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח-בֵּיתוֹ--עַד-בֹּקֵר.

22 And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side-posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning.

The Significance of this parallel:

DOES DIVINE PROVIDENCE APPLY IN THE DESERT?

Shemot Ch. 16

ב וַיִּלִּינוּ (וַיִּלּוֹנוּ) כָּל-עֵדֶת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן--בַּמִּדְבָּר.

2 And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness;

ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִי-יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד-יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל-סִיר הַבָּשָׂר, בְּאֲכַלְנוּ לֶחֶם לְשֹׁבַע: כִּי-הוֹצֵאתָם אֹתָנוּ אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה, לְהַמִּית אֶת-כָּל-הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה בָּרָעַב. {ס}

3 and the children of Israel said unto them: 'Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Rav Yonatan Grossman:

The people's "nostalgic" depiction of Egypt focuses on two elements. First, they describe Egypt as a place where people die "by the Hand of God." Second, Egypt provided them with an alleged abundance of food ("flesh pots", "fill of bread"). This latter component fits appropriately into context - the people are now expressing their disapproval of the food supply in the desert. But why do they characterize Egypt as a place where people perish "by the Hand of God"? As part of their objection to desert life, shouldn't they present Egypt as specifically the land which facilitates life? Furthermore, these two apparently critical characteristics of Egypt seem to form the basis of the continuation of the verse:

1) "For you have brought us out into this wilderness:" As opposed to Egypt, where their existence was governed by the Almighty Himself, "you," Moshe and Aharon, took us out from Egypt.

2) "To starve this whole congregation to death:" In the desert, the people encountered the threat of starvation, in contradistinction to the bounty of Egypt.

* In Mara, the Torah states: "The people grumbled against Moshe, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" (15:24).

* In Refidim: "The people quarreled with Moshe, and they said, 'Give us water to drink'" (17:2).

* Here, in Midbar Sin: **"The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moshe and Aharon IN THE DESERT.** And the Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died...'"

...The nation's complaint must be understood in light of the religious beliefs which pervaded the ancient world. The notion of a deity who reigned supreme in a given setting (or against certain nations), but was powerless in other settings (or against other nations), was quite common. Benei Yisrael may very well have been misled by this theological misconception, that one who leaves the city for the desert forgoes the protection of the merciful god, only to be subject to the demons and spirits which indiscriminately control the uninhabited wilderness. It would seem that this grave error forms the basis of this specific complaint.